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# THE RELATIONS OF LITERATURE TO SOCIETY.

BY MRS. AMELIA E. BARR.

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MOST social truths are truths for circumstances, and for periods ; they are very seldom truths absolute and eternal. Among such passing verities, Carlyle's dictum concerning what book-writers do for the world and the small esteem the world has for book-writers must be classed. That literature has not yet found its harmonious relation to society is true ; but it is not true that any large or important portion of society acts toward literature as depicted in a late society novel—that is, it does not hide the fact of a woman writing a book, as if she had committed some unpardonable social crime. A minority, at whose pretensions the world takes leave to laugh with a good-natured tolerance, may indeed regard writers with scorn, but the writers feel for this minority a contempt so measureless as to leave a good standing balance in their own favor.

So far, then, the two classes are quits ; yet it may not be amiss to give a moment's consideration to the assertion of this Brahminical Four Hundred that writing is "low," and that it is especially "low" for a woman. These definitions are understood when explained by the rules governing a set so exclusive. Writers have ideals ; writers are original in speech, in dress, and manners. Now, among a class where the commonplace and the conservative are invincible rules of conduct, where etiquette has a bible of its own, and the laws of dining, dressing, speech, company, and even feeling, are decorously and definitely laid down, could there be anything more impertinent than an ideal, more vulgar than originality ? And as a woman sinning against the social code is a sinner above all others, it is perhaps a justifiable kindness to prevent her from making a book. Such a declaration of individuality might open the door for her rebellion against social slavery of all kinds.

But the number of this social set is very small, and their influence upon the great world of thought and action almost *nil*. Nothing is lost to literature by their neglect, and nothing would

be gained by their condescending to use literature as an expounder of their articles of faith and admiration. Writers of all sorts may easily let this portion of society be to them as if they were not.

However, it might, with some show of truth, be asserted that literature has not a high social standing, even among that large class of sensible citizens whose mental capacities have been well developed, and whose refinement is as evident as their wealth—men and women who live noble lives, in constant contact with the great facts of life, just and generous, free from arrogance, ardently appreciative of every good book. And, as in all good books there is an invisible element, a subtle principle emanating from the writer to the reader, it does seem singular that the book which is part of the writer—his soul impressed on the white paper—should be highly valued, and he himself awaken no living interest; nay, perhaps meet only with indifference or dislike.

We may find a partial answer to this singular condition by applying to literature that commercial test so well understood in all other matters. Men and women write books either because they have something to say or because they are under the necessity of saying something. In the first case, literature is followed for literature's sake, and society feels that it is under an obligation for the effort to please or instruct it. In the second case, the book has been written as a means of livelihood; the writer has the financial result, and society is under no more obligation to him or to her than it is to the clergyman who preaches to it for money, or the lawyer who defends it for money, or the physician who heals it for money. A fine rider, a clever ball-player, a tireless walker, are all objects of social admiration and respect, until they turn these accomplishments into a means of livelihood; then the athlete, the pitcher, the rider, the dancer, find that in accepting a financial reward they have forfeited their social recognition; perhaps not unfairly so, for few things are worth paying twice for, and they who desire the cash must do without the praise and admiration.

This position is easily comprehensible under old monarchical dispensations, but certainly anomalous in a country where money is the test of all efforts, and the making of money the most honorable of occupations. Indeed, we must go back to the very beginnings of social life to discover its origin, and acknowledge that for sixty centuries the world has held the men of action

higher than the men of thought. The soldier Cæsar received from it the imperial crown ; the thinker Christ, the shameful cross. Romulus the fighter is remembered ; Remus the seer is forgotten. At the end of the nineteenth century we are still barbarians enough to think a successful soldier higher than an almost godlike inventor. For this world is a material world, and it ranks men as they meet its necessities. The fighter and the money-maker touch constantly its most active and imperious demands ; the writer and the thinker only serve its higher and most transitory moods. If, then, writers and thinkers are not satisfied with the amount of social consideration they receive, they have only to desist from instructing and entertaining mankind, and do something for a livelihood which touches what men eat or drink, or the wherewith of their dress or adornment.

These are radical and ancient causes of slight esteem, but there are others which are generic, and which spring from the profession. First, there is a singular lack of *esprit de corps* in the higher walks of it - even successful writers have not scrupled to make its peculiarities and poverty "material" for their wit ; as in "Pendennis," where Thackeray introduces his readers to writers, publishers, editors, and contributors who are neither attractive nor respectable, and who are rather abnormal than typical.

But it is the easy entrance into the ranks of literature which is the great cause of whatever social contempt clings to the profession. A man who goes into a large trading business, or who spends years in preparing for the law, gives society a bond for his respectability. He has invested either time or money, perhaps both. But a pretence of literature is too often used by the lazy and vicious as a cloak for their evil lives, and thus the noblest of professions becomes a kind of cave of Adullam, to which men of unsteady habits and women of doubtful respectability resort. A sprightly fancy, a ready wit, a knowledge of life, a soured disposition able and unscrupulous enough to write scurrilous personalities, are all the introduction needed to the daily press, where the demand is constant, and the availability depends more on the mental than the moral qualities of its servants. For if a man writes a brilliant paper, do the public really care whether he is a member of a Christian association or not?

But this class of writers are in no true sense "men of letters." They produce paragraphs, epigrams, short, clever sketches, short

stories, poems for the newspapers and other periodicals ; but works demanding learning, patience, steady application, are as much beyond their power as they are out of their liking. Such ephemeral literary workers can no more be classed with writers like Mr. Grote, Mr. Holmes, or Mr. Stevenson than the pettifogger can be counted the peer of the judge in the Supreme Court, or the pedler of quack nostrums the equal of the leading physician of the age. For a really great writer never falls into a class ; he has a marked individuality, and stands alone. But the world has no time to make such distinctions ; hence the justice of the financial test : a great writer can now obtain great financial results, and society accepts this credential of his power and respectability.

It must finally be regretfully admitted that women writers have done much to degrade the profession of literature. They do hasty and slipshod work, inaccurate and sentimental, overloaded with adjectives, frescoed all over with purple patches of what they consider fine writing. But this is a venial fault ; where they chiefly offend is in making love the all-important and absorbing passion of life. Their stories teach too often that a girl has an absolute right to the fool of her choice, though she has to break every holy domestic tie to gratify herself. Further, Florence Layard accuses them of being the translators of the lowest and most sensual French novels, though they gain by this dirty work only the smallest and most precarious of incomes. Is the world much to blame if it gives some of the odium due to a profession which offers women such opportunities ?

But then it is not only literature which is wounded in the house of its reputed friends ; all other professions are obliged to suffer in the same way : theology, law, and the faculty of medicine are alike degraded by unworthy members of their fraternities. At this day it is very certain that good writers receive all the attention from the social world they can desire ; and if they do not enter society, it is because they do not wish to do so. The day has gone by for either patronage or lionizing. American authors never admitted the superiority of gold ; and even in England a Lady Holland would not now find any Tom Moore to snub in public. Good society is emulous of giving honor to whoever has written a good book ; and it is not true that either men or women need to suffer socially for having done so.

In fact, the tendency of the very highest society is now to

affect literature. Queens and princes, lords and ladies, are eager not only for the fame, but for the financial results, of literature. For literature no longer starves its professors ; on the contrary, hundreds whom law, theology, and medicine suffer to starve come to literature and are fed.

"All the clever people in society could write books, if they would condescend to do it ;—I could," said a silly little girl, who danced around the first tier of millionaires. It is a pity her opinion is not correct. We might then have some literary dandyism ; beautiful volumes composed between the short and long sentences of fashionable hard labor—prose full of musk and millefleurs, with all the lace and jewelry of style and versification. But this is not likely, because, however clever people may be, it requires something more than "condescension" to write books. It is not enough to think, and to know ; there must be the faculty of utterance, and of a peculiar kind of utterance. Writing comes by art, not by chance. The efforts of chance writers, even if they be clever, are things for editors to lose their sweetest tempers over. Perhaps there may be nothing in writing good books, and people who do not write them may be as intellectual as those who do. Whoever think so, let them try it. As surely as they do, they will find that an amateur book will as certainly betray itself as an amateur attempt to make a dress-coat.

The true writer gives his whole intellect and his whole time to his work, and he is satisfied to do so. He has no time and no interest to spare for tiddledy-winks and donkey parties, nor even for progressive euchre. It does not amuse him to say "so nice," and "so pleasant," and "thanks," fifty times an hour, and to say very little else more sensible. He objects to being made a lion of, to writing his autograph for gushing girls, to playing games he abandoned with his short jacket and school-books. So, then, it is not society which is unappreciative of literature ; in ten cases out of ten it is literature which cannot fold itself small enough for society. For in spite of all controversy, it is a great thing to influence public opinion, to inform the ignorant, to solace the unhappy, and to give to unknown multitudes a high, and pure enjoyment.

"For many can talk, and more can fight,  
But few give myriads of hearts delight."

AMELIA E. BARR.